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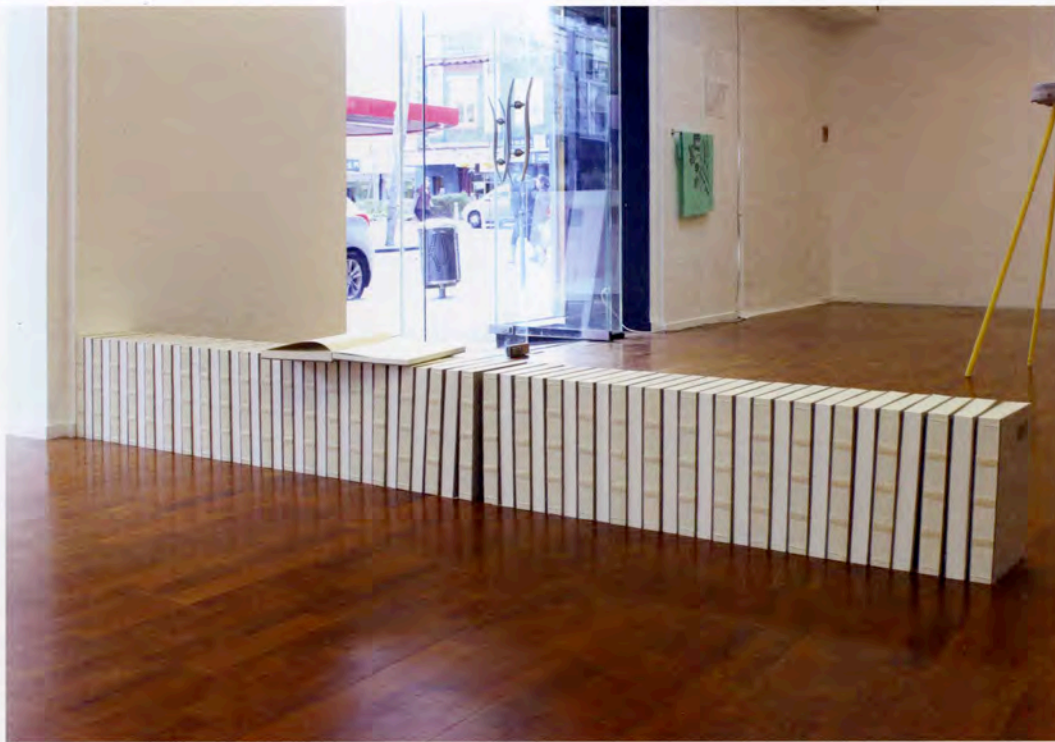
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But How Does It Mean?

Aesthetic Experience in the Work of Three Conceptualists

EDWARD HANFLING

'Aesthetic experience' is historically considered to be a primarily visual experience. Conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s switched the emphasis from aesthetics to ideas. It may seem perverse, then, to stress the 'look' and 'feel' of the contemporary conceptual art of Gabrielle Amodeo, Dorota Broda and Yolunda Hickman. In truth, though, *all* art is conceptual—there is no purely optical, brainless experience—and *all* artists, in some sense, gather up stuff from the everyday world and turn it into 'art'. But conceptual artists use specific and distinctive aesthetic strategies to perform this act—strategies that often go unnoticed and unrecognised as 'aesthetic' precisely because they are intended to appear anti-aesthetic, or because they undermine the traditional specialness of the aesthetic by finding beauty in the mundane. The interesting thing about conceptual art—as with any other kind of art—is not what it means but how it means.

Amodeo's 2012 work, *A Million Dots (The Small Movements That Make Up Grand Gestures)*, is a grid of pencil marks that enact, or express, the artist's attraction to the internal logic of the square metre, which can be divided into 1,000,000 square millimetres. She does not want to apply this logic to anything else or pursue it in further mathematical equations. Rather, it is something beautiful in and of itself; the neat-and-tidiness appeals to her. The image we see first is the square metre as the

sum of its parts. With time, we might also see the way in which the image was made. The dots are a succession of moments and actions, regular but in each instance minutely different, the traces of a process that was painstaking and perhaps painful. How long did it take? How did she line them up so perfectly? Was it boring or interesting? Did she find pleasure in the repetition and rhythm of the manual activity, or satisfaction in the progress and eventual accomplishment? In other words, we might start to imagine Amodeo's state of mind, and empathise with her endeavour.

The use of logical, regulatory systems, detached from their social function but obsessively implemented and followed, is a long-standing convention of conceptual art. Originally, this was a rebellion against the then dominant medium of painting, with its arbitrary, solipsistic values based on individual style and expression. Amodeo's *Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours* (2014), a long sequence of books recording every lived and projected hour of the artist's life, could be a tribute to Japanese-American artist On Kawara, whose day-by-day date paintings finally ceased, along with the life of the artist, in June this year. The works involve a quiet, single-minded, ritualistic, fatalistic and avowedly pointless process. There is a sense in which the system becomes personal, belying its anti-expressive basis, by way of a cathartic process and an austere effect to which the artists are clearly attached. Amodeo has said: 'I am drawn to things I find pleasing, they stick

(opposite)
 GABRIELLE AMODEO
Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours 2014
 65 hand-made A4 books, installed dimensions vary

(right)
 GABRIELLE AMODEO
 PODOCARPACEAE / *Dacrycarpus* – PANDANACEAE / *Freycinetia* 2009-2013
 Botanical books (Audrey Eagle, *Eagle's Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand*, Te Papa Press, Wellington 2005) with artist intervention, installed cuttings, dimensions vary

(below) YOLUNDA HICKMAN
Acre 2011
 64 books with total paper surface area equal to an acre



in my head, and they will start to form into works . . . I find lists aesthetically pleasing where other people will find them stressful and neurotic or just plain dull.¹ Her hand-made books, though intended and presented as art, are a natural outgrowth of her everyday life, in which she works at a book bindery.

In a recent re-reading of aspects of early conceptual art, the American Eve Meltzer argues that despite Sol Le Witt's intention to purge aesthetics and expression from his art by using highly ordered systems such as grids, these rogue elements somehow slip through the cracks anyway:

Le Witt's information cannot help but accede to the tactile and temporal registers of meaning that inhere in his process and materials . . . in short, the phenomenal and corporeal realms, and the realm of affect, all of which structuralism would rather have us forget. The haptic has found its way into Le Witt's anti-optic, even as he has worked so hard to secure it and close it down.²

The failure of early conceptual artists to purge their work of the 'non-conceptual' becomes a concept that itself informs Amodeo's recent work, *Keeping Secrets and Stealing Things* (2013-14) at Mezzanine, Artspace. In this exposé of youthful misdemeanours and embarrassments in a series of weekly 'chapters', the documentary impulse is taken to a more overtly expressive level. Amodeo's affection for books, and for methodically classifying and cataloguing things, is also revealed in *PODOCARPACEAE/Dacrycarpus—PANDANACEAE/Freycinetia* (2009-13), where she was in thrall to both the aesthetic power and the botanical function of Audrey Eagle's exquisite illustrations for *Eagle's Complete Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand*.

Yolunda Hickman likes books, too. *Acre* (2011) is a stack of books, the pages of which equate to a square acre. Some of Hickman's books cover still vaster spaces and places with charts and reconfigured maps (the system by which the world is divided up

into nations), often carrying the baggage of the age of colonisation. In *Pair* (2012) she sets up a relationship between the two sides of a newspaper clipping, one a quiz that asks the reader to match the new and old names of particular countries, the other a story about the 'the starting point of the modern Australian nation'. Between and around these items, Hickman opens up a space for *thought*, but she does so by way of simple, elegant juxtapositions of found items. The consistency of her conceptual strategy amounts to, perhaps not a 'style' as such, but a distinctive 'look' and feeling.

Of course, individual expression is a dodgy concept these days, and Dorota Broda's installations tend to





suggest that what we think of as individual expression is produced by the systems of capitalist society—the language of advertising and branding, for example. *We are loyal*, a 2012 installation at Gloria Knight, called to mind New Zealand's America's Cup yachting campaigns, in which sentiments are drummed up by nationalistic jingoism allied to corporate sponsorship. *Power to you*, for the 2013 Auckland Art Gallery

(left) DOROTA BRODA *part time artist full time friend* 2013
Hand-printed banners and posters (screen-printing ink, synthetic banner material), found furniture, framed artworks & accessories, dimensions variable

(below) DOROTA BRODA *power to you* 2013
Hand-printed banner (screen-printing ink, synthetic banner material), trolley and accessories, dimensions variable

(opposite above) YOLUNDA HICKMAN
In Harmony (Wolves howling at the moon) 2012
Counted cross stitch, 330 x 235 mm.

(opposite below) GABRIELLE AMODEO *A Million Dots (The Small Movements That Make Up Grand Gestures)*—detail 2012
Pencil on paper, 1200 x 1200 mm.

exhibition *Freedom Farmers*, explored the relationship between the artist, the art institution and corporate brands:

This is what I am doing in the gallery space, undermining myself as an artist and producer of independent thought and 'original' work. Corporate slogans and found objects within the installation are selected for their personal meaning and relevance. I am not so much engaging in the tautology of an institutional critique or revealing invisible structures of late-capitalism as attempting to locate within art spaces a subjective voice, and failing to do so amongst the corporate-ridden environs.³

Yet in this statement, and in her work, Broda permits personal feelings to get amongst seemingly impersonal items, such as commercial slogans and utilitarian furniture. In *part time artist full time friend* (2013) at Gloria Knight, the chairs and tables recall an art school environment, mainly because they are interspersed with artworks by, and photographs of, Elam students.⁴ There is almost a nostalgia here for the relationships between people that developed as they were all finding their own way but also all in the same boat. Ambitions and desires, both individual and



shared, are performed through the environment and systems of a corporate entity, the academic institution.

Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s introduced a range of strategies designed to escape both the commodification of art and the increasingly sophisticated aesthetics of the commodity in the form of marketing and advertising. These strategies included: the ostensibly *anti*-aesthetic and anti-expressive use of form; found objects rather than artistic creativity; prominence given to language (especially written text) and other social systems. However, as both Susan Best and Eve Meltzer have argued in recent publications, conceptual art, in its very renunciation of the aesthetic, positioned itself in *relation* to the aesthetic, thereby re-affirming the pre-eminence of aesthetic experience as a function of art. Best, channelling French philosopher Jacques Derrida's insights into the interdependence of seemingly polarised positions, has written:

Aesthetics is precisely one of the structures of thought that art history inhabits, one that in recent times has been not only neglected and misunderstood, but also positively maligned . . . the vehement rejection of aesthetics foregrounded by the very term 'anti-aesthetic', should alert us to the ongoing pertinence of this domain of knowledge.⁵

Amodeo, Broda and Hickman all reprise the historical conventions of conceptual art in a way that acknowledges that they are aesthetic strategies. Just as Amodeo turns an impersonal, functional system into something personal, poetic and pointless, Broda injects an element of visual poetry into her subversive appropriation of the language of consumerism and corporate culture. Broda's own 'trademark' or 'logo' is the use of a diluted red ink that fades over time. Found slogans and signs that, in their original context, would hit you in the face and grab you by the scruff of the neck, become instead lyrical, captivating, gradually unfolding effects. In other words, they are absorbed into art, rendered useless and absurd, objects of contemplation and thought.

Perhaps this uselessness is, obliquely, part of the concept behind *part time artist full time friend*. The slogan 'massive reductions', in tandem with the art school reference, reads as a comment on recent funding cuts in the arts, particularly in tertiary education. Qualifications in the arts do not lead to useful employment or a contribution to the economy, according to the populist right-wing rhetoric. (How dare someone do something other than bolster the wealth of their employer?) Academics have responded to these attacks on their existence by saying that the arts *are* useful—they open up people's minds and foster critical thinking and all that. But as Stanley Fish has pointed out, they are playing into the hands of their critics by justifying the arts in terms of the instrumental values of capitalism.⁶

Broda's art, on the other hand, is more knowingly useless as political critique, parading the self-perpetuating aesthetic strategies and conventions of conceptual art and thereby neutralising its engagement with the world outside of art. In dealing with corporate sponsorship, Broda invokes the



hard-hitting works of Hans Haacke from the 1970s. Appropriated slogans call to mind Jenny Holzer as well as Peter Robinson's work of the mid-late 1990s, while the rudimentary furnishings have a touch of et al. about them. 'Found' materials, insofar as they have been 'found' before, by other artists, have become the property of art, recognisable as aesthetic strategies, rather than (as in Marcel Duchamp's original conception of the ready-made) providing direct access to non-art levels of meaning. Broda signals her awareness of this in her statement: 'I cannot not make conceptual art, at least until I learn ways to undo the embodied knowledge resulting from art school teaching.'⁷

The systematic strategies of conceptual art are now so venerable that they can seem beautiful, or at least aesthetically pleasing, on their own terms. Hickman has remarked of her cross-stitch works, such as *In Harmony (Wolves howling at the moon)* (2012), in which the colours of pretty embroidered pictures are analysed and reformulated diagrammatically, that 'Aesthetics are determined through systems and parameters rather than judgements of beauty.'⁸ Yet the resulting image, paradoxically, calls to mind the aesthetic 'purity' of modernist abstraction. Aesthetic experience, though, is never 'pure' in the sense of 'art for art's sake' or 'formalist' criticism in the mid-twentieth century, where one was expected to block out extraneous thoughts pertaining to the everyday world to ensure an experience of art *as art*. Rather, as British theorists Dave Beech and John Roberts have explained, it is possible to consider art's autonomy in terms of 'what could be counted as legitimately intrinsic to art despite being external to it'.⁹ It is in this sense that I employ the term 'aesthetic' in relation to the work of Amodeo, Broda and Hickman—that is, acknowledging and embracing the fact that their distinctively austere visual elements open up a raft of non-visual sensations.





(left) YOLUNDA HICKMAN *Size* 2014
Digitally printed carpet, site specific installation at Te Tuhi, Auckland, 7100 x 4950 mm.
(Photograph: Andrew Kennedy)

(below) YOLUNDA HICKMAN *Of the World (Stars)* 2014
Brass, site specific installation at Old South British Building lobby, Auckland, 7200 x 3300 mm.
(Photograph: Kallan Macleod)

(opposite) GABRIELLE AMODEO *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly: The Contest, Scene 41* 2007
Three-channel video projection, dimensions vary
(Photographed at Auckland Film Archive, 2012)

I am drawn to the work of these three artists because it is, in the same way as certain abstract paintings, reserved, quiet, rigorous and open. Other artists have taken conceptual art in a different direction, towards complexity rather than succinctness; they make bloated installations that seem to be trying to convince the viewer that they are full of ideas, but instead degenerate into overwhelming, over-stimulating visual spectacle. The lean, tough materiality of the works under discussion here, is more resistant, withheld, conceptually complex by dint of its aesthetic simplicity. As Kirk Varnedoe said of modernist abstraction, 'When modern artists narrow the variety of forms they use,

and cut back towards simplicity, they can wind up increasing, rather than delimiting, the volatility of possible meanings and associations that can attach to such a vocabulary.'¹⁰

The aesthetic impact of Hickman's work can certainly be dramatic and alluring, as in her translation of the 'A' paper size chart into a carpet for Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in *Size* (2014), or the *Of the World (Stars)* (2014) installation, a 'galaxy' of stars in the foyer of the Old South British Building in Shortland Street, Auckland. In the latter, the brass stars, derived from the various forms and configurations of stars on national flags, projected several centimetres from the white wall so that they have a floating, sparkling feeling. With the black marble floor and reflections in a mirror wall, the whole effect is seductive and magical. The accompanying wall text (though written in rather gushing prose) makes the perceptive observation that the work 'walks the line between conceptual investigation and aesthetic wonder.' 'Wonder' is the key word, because the expansive, empty white space in the work is a space of contemplation, a



void into which artist and viewer alike can project, not just ideas, but non-verbal levels of feeling and sensation. Broda's installations may similarly have an affective dimension that resides, the artist believes, 'in a sensation that . . . come[s] from the absence, from what is not there in each install—something unrealised, stopped half-way.' She continues: 'I am hoping for non-uttered, non-verbal communication (kinaesthetic or gestural) via the matter itself, one that might happen without an expert explanation.'¹¹ Emptiness and whiteness are characteristic of an art that is pared back to an elegant idea.

Amodeo, for her part, finds 'negative space' appealing 'because it is a physical form (for all of its 'absence' and 'negative') that I can imagine a lot of different types of ideas into.'¹² Her moving-image installation, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly: The Contest, Scene 41* (2007), physically places the viewer in the space between the dangerous combatants of a standoff, filling in the gaps in the scene and narrative. A wealth of experience, feeling and indeed time is also literally bound up in the sensuous and simple whiteness, the ascetic aesthetic of her hand-made books: 'books are almost like worm holes in how they can collapse and concertina out time and space: whether it be narrative time, or the time of the author to write or the reader to read each page, whether it be the space of the subject the book contains or the physical space of the pages. Books are on the surface so diminutive, so every-day, but their sheer capacity of containment is pretty spectacular!'¹³

Amodeo's books have been instrumental in helping me to think about the aesthetic dimension of conceptual art. I remain obsessed with the work

Series Drawn she showed at Rm Gallery last year in an exhibition I reviewed for this magazine. Perhaps it is a matter of chance: I happen to love the game of cricket, and the work draws out some things about test cricket in particular that inspire this love, such as the languorous pace and length of time it occupies, the rituals of scoring and describing the game, and the physical and mental discipline involved in playing it. But an unmistakable symptom of experiencing art that is very, very good is that it all you can do is earnestly repeat that it is very, very good. I also find myself feeling a bit 'hyper'. I have had this experience with the work of Patrick Lundberg and now with Gabrielle Amodeo. It is an aesthetic experience in which feeling, and all sorts of stuff from the everyday world (cricket, politics, whatever), is happily accommodated.

1. Gabrielle Amodeo, email to the author, 5 October 2014.
2. Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2013, p. 69.
3. Dorota Broda, email to the author, 9 October 2014.
4. Rebecca Boswell, 'Dorota Broda Exhibition', *EyeContact*, 30 September 2013, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2013/09/dorota-broda-exhibition>, accessed 9 October 2014.
5. Susan Best, *Visualising Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*, I.B. Tauris, New York & London 2014, p. 16.
6. Stanley Fish, *Save the World On Your Own Time*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008.
7. Broda, email to the author, 9 October 2014.
8. Yolunda Hickman, email to the author, 7 October 2014.
9. Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, London & New York 2002, p. 41.
10. Kirk Varnedoe, *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern*, Thames & Hudson, London 1989, p. 176.
11. Broda, email to the author, 9 October 2014.
12. Amodeo, email to the author, 5 October 2014.
13. Ibid.

